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Sino-Soviet Relations: How Much Progress?

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claimed that "some slight amelioration" on practical issues had taken place between the governments of the USSR and China. He prefaced this remark, however, with the statement that there would never be "good" relations between the two countries. Kapitsa is one of the Soviet Union's older and more blunt China hands. In mentioning the "slight amelioration," he was undoubtedly referring to the sort of seemingly positive occurrences in Sino-Soviet relations over the past six months that have been topics of discussion

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- An agreement reached by the two sides in July allowing the Chinese to navigate the main river channels around the Soviet-occupied but Chinese-claimed Chimnaya (Hei-hsia-tzu) Island opposite Khabarovsk.
- The subsequent and related holding of the 20th annual session of the joint Sino-Soviet border river navigation talks. The talks, which normally take place annually, were not held in 1975 and 1976 because of the Chinese demand for satisfaction over the issue of navigation around the island.
- The signing of the annual trade and payments protocol between the two sides in Moscow on 21 July.
- The arrival of a new Chinese Ambassador in Moscow in August, filling a void that had existed since March 1976.

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- The meeting of the new Ambassador and Soviet Prime Minister Kosygin in October--the first between a top Soviet official and the Chinese Ambassador since the last ambassador had a farewell meeting with then-President Podgorny in February 1976.

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- Chinese Foreign Minister Huang Hua's attendance at a 7 November Soviet anniversary reception given by Ambassador Tolstikov in Peking--the highest level of Chinese participation at such a reception in a decade. In addition, Kapitsa claimed that discussions had taken place with the Chinese earlier in September over the fate of three Soviet soldiers detained by the Chinese for the past seven years for straying across the border.

Taken together, these events portray a pattern of forward movement in Sino-Soviet relations. Looked at individually, however, these events present a mixed picture.

The Navigation Agreement

The agreement on Chinese navigation around Chimnaya, which on the whole is a step forward, showed that the two sides were able to reach a procedural compromise on a contentious issue that had been blocking the presumably mutually beneficial annual discussions of low-level joint river navigation matters. On the other hand, the agreement did not suggest any progress on the real issue--the conflicting claim to ownership of the strategic island. Chinese navigation around the island is now subject to carefully stated Soviet regulations and, according to a Soviet official, does not prejudice either side's claim to ownership. In fact, a case could be made that the Chinese have achieved a victory--that by holding the navigation talks hostage to settlement of the issue, they finally compelled the Soviets to satisfy their demands.

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The holding of the 20th annual session of the joint border river navigation talks also presents a mixed picture. Because they did not take place at all in 1975 and 1976, the convening of the talks is a sign of some progress. In addition, the Chinese claimed that agreement had been reached on "some of the questions" discussed. This was the first time the Chinese acknowledged agreement on any aspect of the talks since 1969. The Soviets also announced that "new rules of navigation" were adopted.

On the other hand, the holding of these talks annually has been the rule throughout the declining period of Sino-Soviet relations since the late 1950s. The only previous standdown occurred for three years in the mid-1960s during a nadir in relations that coincided with the excesses of the Cultural Revolution. The talks continued even in the wake of the open border fighting along the Ussuri River in 1969. Both sides point out that in themselves the talks are devoid of broad political significance, dealing instead with technical matters of navigation regulations.

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Trade and Ambassadorial Contacts

The signing of the trade agreement does not indicate any progress in political relations. In fact, this year it could be used as an indication of exactly the opposite. The agreement is an annual event, but this year was signed two months later than the one in 1976, suggesting that negotiations were difficult. By all accounts, Sino-Soviet trade will drop this year from 1976 levels. The real value in trade between the two sides increased 15 percent in 1976 from a bad year in 1975, but was still below the levels of 1972-74.

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The posting of a new Chinese Ambassador obviously raises the level of Peking's representation in Moscow and represents a return to a level of "normalcy" in this respect--but it is a level of "normalcy" that existed during the Mao years--hardly a necessary harbinger of progress. Nevertheless, should Peking decide to enhance its dealings with Moscow, it now at least has an Ambassador in place. The meetings of the new Ambassador with Kosygin seemed only to be in compliance with diplomatic procedures. The same procedure was followed when the last Chinese Ambassador arrived in 1971.

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Taken together, the recent ostensibly forward developments in Sino-Soviet relations are a very mixed bag, probably deserving of little more than the cautious hope expressed by a Soviet Foreign Ministry official recently that additional "practical steps" might produce a slow improvement in intergovernmental relations. Kapitsa was probably not far off in his perspective when he referred to them as some slight amelioration on practical issues, in contrast to the bleak outlook on general relations.

At this time, there are no signs of any change on fundamental issues. There has been no observable progress on ideological matters, on the border dispute, or on the struggle for influence abroad. The level of polemics continues to rise and fall but overall to be sharp and occasionally vitriolic. Soviet officials seem to be virtually unanimous in their inability to detect any amelioration in China's list of demands for Soviet concrete concessions before any significant progress can be achieved in the relationship.

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a major new Soviet concern that undoubtedly outweighs whatever nuance can be associated with the list of events cited above. Moscow's current obsession is that the major non-Communist industrial powers are going to respond positively to Peking's renewed interest in foreign technology to expand its military-industrial base. Soviet distress at this possibility is evident in its propaganda and in statements of Soviet officials to anyone who will listen. In addition, Soviet demarches have presently been made to government officials in France, West Germany, and Australia to dissuade them from providing Peking with any help in this regard. The list of those approached will undoubtedly grow. In short, Soviet words and actions continue to indicate that Moscow has taken no real comfort from its dealings with the new leaders in Peking.

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